Holy Fear
Mark 4:35-41
June 12, 1977

John M. Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

Every so often an experience is given to us, wholly unexpected, unplanned, unstructured which momentarily, at least, lifts us above ourselves, and the very goodness of which confirms our deepest theological convictions. Something like that happened to me last week.

I was in the Hocking Hills at a summer home for a dinner meeting. Before the meal I was taken on a walk through the woods to see a long and winding valley from a vantage point high up on a bluff. It was truly a magnificent view. In the soft light of early evening the valley was an emerald green, the hills gentle and rolling, one of the most pastoral scenes I have experienced for some time. On the way back, still filled with the beauty of that picture, my eye was attracted by a flash of red in the woods. No great thing for an accomplished bird watcher, but for me the Scarlet Tanager has always been an exotic picture in elementary school bird books. Whenever, as a child, we were instructed to draw pictures of birds I would invariably turn to the Scarlet Tanager. And now, for the first time in my life I was looking at one: my old friend - who really did live and move and have being beyond the book plates.

I thought about the experience later. It was so refreshing, so full of goodness and life. I remembered a paragraph I had read once that suggested that one is very close to the ultimate source of things when he finds himself saying: "God, it's good to be alive!" I looked for the paragraph and found it in a major work under the title, Naming the Whirlwind, by Langdon Gilkey, a University of Chicago theologian.

In the chapter in question Gilkey suggests ways in which you and I are given experiences of God. It's one of my favorites and I'd like to share it with you.

"Common aspects of our experience: our deep joy in living, a sense of the pulsating vitality and strength of life that every creature knows: the awe at the common wonder and beauty of life - perhaps in the creatures of nature or at the birth of a child; the precious sense of meaning and of hope when we find some purpose or activity that draws out our powers, and we know who we are in history and why we are here at this time and place; the wonder of community and of personal intercourse with another human being - these common experiences are given to us and not created by us, but it is they which buoy us up, that make us glad we are alive, that fill us with deep joy and refuel our existence with a felt power...As gifts they reflect the power of life - from beyond ourselves, from the ultimate source of power and meaning." (Naming the Whirlwind, p.311).

Now the reason a paragraph like that is in a book of theology, Naming the Whirlwind, is precisely because modern consciousness has rather completely banished the idea of a God who is God. Traditionally, God has been conceived as a being who exists apart from humanity: who created life in the first place and may be perceived by the mind of man in a way not too differently from the way a tree or mountain is perceived. Even if no one actually saw God, He remained an object to be observed, in imagination at least. Thus the proverbial school boy could confine his theological imagery to the picture of an old man, with white beard and flowing robe, seated on a throne high above the heavens, busying Himself with lightning and thunder and blizzards and earthquakes. God was transcendent. His existence was not ours, but very real nonetheless. God, in the Westminster Confession is

"infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts or passions, immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute."

Then came the twentieth century. And it took a Soviet cosmonaut to verbalize the demise of the traditional, transcendent idea of God. Back from space he told reporters that he hadn't seen God at all - nor angels for that matter. Suddenly, traditionalists had to face what they had known all along; namely, that God wasn't "up there" - at least in the sense that people had been believing he was "up there" for thousands of years.

The theologians jumped into the fray. Bishop John A.T.Robinson wrote a little book in the Sixties under the title Honest to God which suggested that it made no sense at all to think about God in terms of space and time. He is not "up there" or "out there", Robinson said. He is "in here". And the new motif for modern Christian thought was born. The name for it is immanence. God is "in here". If He exists at all it is in the depths of the individual's spirit and somewhere between people in the deepest, most intimate relationships. The result of that radical shift was that God simply ceased to exist for many people.

At the same time life in general was becoming radically secular. We talked about this a bit last week. Modern science pushed back the perimeters of the unknown, mysteries were solved and what people once attributed to God was suddenly understood in the laboratory vocabulary of cause and effect. Insurance companies may still insist that a violent and destructive windstorm is an "act of God", but most people know better.

Modern history, likewise, shattered the comfortable old certainties. How, Rabbi Richard Rubenstein asked,can you believe in a God who has anything remotely to do with human life and human history, after Auschwitz? There is nothing but a void, Rubenstein said, where God once stood. And in Gilkey's book I cited earlier, he writes: "The most significant recent theological development has been the steady dissolution of certainty, the washing away of the firm ground on which our generation believed we were safely standing. What we thought was solid earth has turned out to be shifting ice - and in recent years as the weather has grown steadily warmer, some of us have in horror found ourselves staring down into rushing depths of dark water." (Op cite, p.5).

Now the professional theologians spend their lives thinking those kind of thoughts. I have taken you on this excursion because it is a climate in which every thoughtful person participates. The theological certainties of the recent past are gone and there is abundant evidence that the demise of the traditional God has set off a frantic, scrambling search for something, anything, to take His place.

And so - to the Bible. God, in Scripture, is both transcendent and immanent. He is both ruler of the universe and loving, intimate companion. Our generation may have reason for focusing on His inwardness - but to overlook His transcendence is to miss at least half of what the Bible says about Him.

Our New Testament Lesson this morning is a delightful illustration. Jesus and His disciples were on the Sea of Galilee in a small fishing boat. That body of water lies 600 feet below sea level. The mountains surrounding it act as a

geological funnel for the prevailing winds off the Mediterranean Sea. Sudden, violent wind squalls are common. They come without warning and leave as quickly as they come, I am told.

Jesus had fallen asleep during the crossing. The account in Mark's Gospel is spare and lean, uncluttered with the kind of scientific questions we ask automaticly. A storm descended and the little boat was tossed like a piece of driftwood. The fishermen - disciples were afraid: they woke Jesus: He spoke to the storm: it went away. He was critical of them for being so afraid of the storm. End of story? Not quite. The disciples should have been greatly relieved but they were not. Mark says they were "filled with awe". The New English Bible translates "awestruck". J.B.Phillips renders it, "sheer awe swept over them". A literal rendering of the Greek word is "they feared with a great fear". That is to say; they were afraid of the storm, but in the presence of a power with authority over nature they were really afraid, with a deeper, more profound, and essentially different kind of fear. That, I think, is the point of the passage. I am far more impressed with the anecdote about the disciples' fear thatn I am with various simplistic explanations of how He managed to still the water. I think their fear has something to teach us.

The very next incident in the Gospel according to Mark, by the way, continues that theme. Jesus healed a man thought to be possessed by a demon, a man held in great and irrational fear. But when the people saw him fully clothed, calm, serene, apparently whole, they were really afraid; so afraid, in fact, that they begged Jesus to leave.

Fear has always been associated with religion; an association that has not always been healthy. Ancient men and women looked out at a world full of mystery and threat and forces they did not understand. Anthropologists tell us that this primal fear, this dread of the unknown, is one of the basic building blocks of religion. This fear is banished by knowledge. The more we understand the less we have to fear. It is not the same emotion experienced by the disciples.

Fear can be irrational and very powerful. Religion, too consistently, has used the fear of God to motivate people to be faithful and loyal and obedient. Martin Luther left for posterity his formative religious feelings which included his stern, demanding father in front of him, and a stern, demanding God behind him - both of whom filled him with terror.

Fear can become paranoia. It can literally paralyze a person or a community or a nation. Fear prevented General George McLelland from attacking the armies of the Confederacy even though his troops vastly outnumbered his opponents. Fear gripped the entire nation in the 1930's until the President rightly observed, "There is nothing to fear but fear itself." Fear of Communism prompted this country to make some decisions that history continues to question and currently, in our own community, irrational fear fueled by rumor and untruth, is threatening to damage a school desegration plan before it gets off the ground.

Fear can paralyze an individual until he or she is rendered ineffective. The little leaguer who is afraid of the ball isn't going to hit it very far. And the individual who is afraid of life isn't going to live it very much.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ banishes fear. In a very real sense the Good News may be reduced to two words "Fear Not!" In the birth narrative the shepherds, you will remember, were "filled with fear", and the angel's first word to them was "Fear not". Likewise, in the accounts of the resurrection, the women who came to the tomb were advised not to be afraid which suggests that they were terrified. In Christ we have nothing to fear. In His love nothing can harm us. In the memorable phrases of St. Paul, "I am certain that neither life nor death, nor principalities nor powers...not anything else in all creation, can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ, our Lord."

And yet religion, I propose, begins with something that can only be called "Holy Fear". It is what the disciples experienced on occasion in the company of Jesus. It is the deep awareness of an other, a totally other, with whom we have to do ultimately. It is what the Psalmist meant in words we read this morning: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;" an idea echoed in the Book of Proverbs. It is that sense that we are not alone, that the universe is inhabited by someone whose being and wisdom and power far exceed our ability to conceive. It is not unlike that good experience which I tried to describe at the outset.

Biblical religion insists on the transcendence of God. Modern life seems unable to cope with that idea. And one of the most important functions of the Church, it seems to me, is to keep the idea alive: to remind a secular world that there is a God.

J.B.Phillips noted, in God our Contemporary, that, "...for vast numbers of people the capacity for awe, wonder and humility has been exhausted or numbed by the bewildering advance of modern knowledge..." (p.34).

I believe that the institutional church has served well when it has pointed to the rudimentary fact of human life; namely, that it lived within the sovereignty of a God who created it. I believe individual human life is completely human only in light of that fact. I believe life without God is not really life at all.

But there are implications beyond the spiritual health of individuals. Lesslie Newbigin, Bishop of the Church of South India, writes that the insistance upon the reality of God is central to the struggle for the dignity and sanctity of humankind. From his particular perspective in India he observes: "A view of the world from which this has been eliminated can have no safeguard for the human person." (Honest Religion for Secular Man, p.62).

That is what is so repugnant about both Fascism and Communism. Neither has room for a transcendent God: neither is bothered much by a personal deity who gives solace to the individual: but neither can survive beside the idea of a just and sovereign Lord of history. Totalitarianism - in which the individual counts for nothing, always depends for its existence on the elimination of the Biblical idea of God. The front line of the struggle today is heavily theological. I was interested to read in the New York Times Book Reivew last week an article about trends in contemporary literature which suggested that the best writing today is happening, not in the west, but in Russia. We have the luxury of debating and discussing the sexual revolution, the "Me Generation", the morality of drugs..But behind the Iron Curtain a real struggle is going on. At issue is the integrity and sanctity of the individual human life. The writers and poets

know it as a theological question: a matter of the existence and transendence of God Himself.

The brave New World of the 1970's and 80's will need nothing so much as a little Holy Fear: a little reverence for life: a little humility before that power which comes from outside. And our personal faith, our deeply personal spiritual pilgrimage depends, I believe, on an openness to something best described as fear of the Lord.

I'm for cultivating it intentionally within ourselves: I'm for intentionally nurturing a precious sense of awe, wonder, reverence. I'm for laying aside our grim attempts to pin God down intellectually and simply, humbly, getting down on our knees before Him with whom we ultimately have to do.

Our faith begins, like the growing awareness of those men who sat in a little boat in the Sea of Galilee, with Holy Fear. It grows in us as we acknowledge that the One who is Holy, and Sovereign and Omnipotent has shown His face in Jesus Christ and has come among us to live and die. Our faith comes to firm ground when we can hear the question posed by the old Spiritual, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?", and respond with a confession terribly and profoundly true - "Sometimes it causes me to tremble!"

That is mature Christian Faith. That is Holy Fear.

Amen.

Father, forgive our arrogance that so often follows our knowledge. Grant us grace to know our humanity and your sovereignty. Grant us faith to rejoice in wonder at Your goodness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.